

The inspiring pedagogy and practice of ignorance: reflections on the use of a particular scrapbook approach in the early years nursery to facilitate curiosity and engagement

Article (Accepted Version)

Webb, Rebecca and Foster, Kathy (2020) The inspiring pedagogy and practice of ignorance: reflections on the use of a particular scrapbook approach in the early years nursery to facilitate curiosity and engagement. Foundation Stage Forum / Tapestry.

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The Inspiring Pedagogy and Practice of Ignorance: reflections on the use of a practitioner scrapbook approach in the early years nursery to facilitate curiosity and engagement

This piece draws together some conceptual ideas and practical experiences of a ‘teacher’ (Rebecca) and a ‘student’ (Kathy) of a university course: a Masters in Early Years Education that also combines the professional qualification of Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS). Of course, both teacher and student have multiple identities. For the student, Kathy, this also includes her significant musicianship and her emerging nursery practitioner professionalism. For the university lecturer, Rebecca, it encompasses her previous experiences as a teacher, an advisor working with teachers in nurseries, and her own sense of herself as ‘always a student’ often learning most from those who question and challenge her at university.

Here Rebecca and Kathy reflect on a strand of the MA course which Kathy felt provoked her to be curious about, elements of her own, practice in ways that enabled her to become wiser in her nursery relationships. Significantly for Kathy, these reflections took her beyond the scope of the course to consider the implications of what we refer to here as ‘the Scrapbook Approach’ for ongoing professional development. Kathy and Rebecca feel that the approach that Kathy took to engaging with her scrapbook is illustrative of an ‘uncertain pedagogy’ that is crucial for all practitioners, whether new to the profession or highly experienced. Uncertain pedagogic approaches enable us to face an anxiety-inducing lack of certainty about immediate and longer term futures - such as those that face us all in post/pandemic times as colleagues Rebecca and Perpetua explore in this [BERA blog](#). They also enable us to support children to have the confidence to explore their social worlds through the prism of uncertainty in ways that engage with their curious, creative, and dynamic dispositions to learn.

The piece is constructed in two parts: the first sets the context for the use of the ‘scrapbook’ as part of Kathy’s course, also drawing on conceptual ideas of knowing, not-knowing, ignorance and uncertainty. The second part uses examples of Kathy’s practical experiences to consider the significance of the approach as a reflective journey informed by pedagogies of ignorance and uncertainty, including thinking through their implications for general nursery practice longer-term.

[The scrapbook: knowing, not knowing, ignorance and uncertainty – Rebecca’s Voice.](#)

‘The Scrapbook’ is an assessed strand of the university course that requires students to creatively ‘respond’ to the [Early Years Foundation Stage](#), including their knowledge of the [8 Standards](#), [Development Matters](#), and the [Characteristics of Effective Learning](#). Crucially, the scrapbook is, as the name suggests, a place where students can make their own decisions, considering what constitutes significant knowledge for them and in what ways. There is no specific requirement about the balance of text and imagery; no stipulation about the size, shape, texture of the book; and no limits to the interpretation of ‘creativity’. The scrapbook

is about a journey of personal and professional engagement that takes seriously the question of ‘what does it mean to know, and to whom, and why?’

We engage with young children in our nurseries, encouraging their play as offering new possibilities for what children can come to know. We see them, in all their uniqueness, as competent social actors in their own right. And so it is with our students: we offer them a knowledge environment that is more than a conforming space of what has gone before. This means that the course must be a space of knowledge uncertainty – of ‘emergent subjectivity’ – where students can be vulnerable and fallible, just as children are as they play and learn through their engagement with what Malaguzzi (1993) calls their *Hundred Languages*. Early Years students require opportunities to listen to their own competing and often contradictory voices about aspects of practice and pedagogy; values and beliefs; relationships and ideas about ‘quality’ provision. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) in their educational research, draw on the concept of ‘ignorance’ as a way of recognising that we are all, whether as young children, teachers or students (inter)dependent, incomplete and vulnerable in our everyday life-worlds, navigating complexity and messiness. Championing ignorance demands the allocation of time and space to be more than rational, competent and autonomous. Pedagogically, ignorance acknowledges the importance of opportunities to interrogate what we don’t know, and to puzzle how we might come to know in new and surprising ways. Ethically, it ensures that we do not fall into the trap of only ever seeing the everyday as made up of: ‘knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid’ (Rancière, 1991, 101).

Kathy used her scrapbook as a reflective tool, finding out, documenting what she did not know, rather than listing what she did. Her form of reflection enabled her to keep the future open by noticing things that challenged and mystified her without hanging on to preconceived assumptions, rather engaging in an ‘expectant not knowing’ (Derrida, 1991, 57). She used Dewey’s ideas of reflection as those that are necessarily: open-minded, responsible and whole-hearted in ways that are entirely commensurate with ignorance, not knowing and being uncertain:

‘I was excited by the prospect of having a space in a physical format that was my own where I could work creatively. Many of us felt slightly daunted at the beginning when there were no specific technical guidelines for using the scrapbook. I wanted mine to be ‘pretty’. However, that idea quickly evaporated as I accepted that I am a messy, left-handed disruptive person and if my scrapbook was to be an extension of myself, it would be the same. One I started using it, I saw my not-knowing and curiosity as something I relished engaging with. I gradually related to the scrapbook in a reflective way: almost as a diary. It became a place where I felt brave and able to embrace my own ignorance creatively and productively as a trainee teacher, stepping out of ‘routine action’ (what Dewey defines as ‘behaviour that is guided by impulse, tradition and authority’) and instead moving into a space of ‘reflective action’.
Kathy’s thoughts on her engagement with her scrapbook.

Reflection as Open-minded, Responsible and Whole-hearted - Kathy's Voice

Using my scrapbook to be open-minded, means having an awareness of what I do not know; what I might need to know; embracing my ignorance to pose rhetorical questions; also taking seriously knowledge I have accumulated through a range of experiences in my life. I begin by describing an encounter early on in my course in a classroom that informs my scrapbook reflection subsequently where I attempt to be open-minded.

I had been observing a music session with a group of 5 year olds in a classroom which – as a musician myself – had disappointed me and left me feeling that the children had been given a sense of making music as something difficult and dull that involved watching rather than doing: 30 children had been required to sit in a circle whilst the music specialist had introduced the children to 4 different instruments in turn. The children had been occasionally given an opportunity to hold an instrument, make a sound with it, and to play a guessing game with their eyes closed which relied on them connecting a sound with the 'right' instrument. But the session took a long time. One child cried due to their frustration of repeatedly putting their hand up and not being picked to play one of the instruments. At the end of the session I talked to the children. One said they 'hated' music (possibly because they weren't picked) and another said they didn't enjoy singing or music and that it was 'boring'. I reflected open-mindedly, cognisant of my own ignorance: I'd only ever been in a classroom with 5 year olds once before during my own school 'work experience'. This required my humility. My scrapbook therefore became the repository for my not-knowing: was this the necessary reality of music lessons for 5 year olds as demanded by the curriculum to which musicians must adhere? Was this the only way it could be done? Maybe it led to engagement and excitement and I had yet to see this emerge? I wondered where the place might be to encourage children to be experimental with a range of ideas of 'music' that come from their own experiences beyond the classroom. Crucially, my reflection considered audacious questions of where/when the children could use music to challenge the taken-for-granted and to experience the exhilaration of this to learn in new ways. After all, my own music-making was as much about disruption as about replicating the 'gone-before'.

Responsibility, means thinking through consequences for others, and not just myself. It means considering: what is my role in relation to that of others? What questions can I ask myself about why teachers act as they do? To explore how I addressed this in my scrapbook, I take up the story of my engagement with the class, and re-enter at a point several months later, when I found myself brave enough to ask the teacher whether instruments were to be found that could be accessed by me with the children. They were on a high shelf in the cupboard. In my scrapbook, I tried to think of the various reasons why they were kept hidden. They are noisy objects. Music may not be valued as highly within the measurement culture of school. There are ongoing pressures on teachers to collect data and concentrate on demonstrating that all children are making progress in 'core subjects'. Activities and resources which aim to support the kinds of knowledge where progress is measured are the ones that tend to be focused upon.

However, I also began to consider responsibility from the perspective of the children. They were missing out on interacting with musical resources and were not experiencing the musicality of expressing themselves by this means. By this stage, I knew there were no opportunities for the children to experiment with instruments independent of their 'taught' sessions with the music specialist. I felt I had a responsibility to use my knowledge as a musician and a trainee teacher to explore possibilities for the instruments to be accessible to use in ways that were not just prescribed and controlled. I documented my thoughts, feelings and doubts in my scrapbook in ways that were uncertain and that did not seek to apportion blame to any of the talented teachers with whom I worked and from whom I gained so much.

Whole-heartedness, is a phrase that I really love. By it, I mean taking active control to think what this requires of me in order to take action, even when I am not certain about what might happen. So here I don't mean taking 'control' in the sense of being certain, but control as considering the implications of an event. I had to think through the fact that although the scrapbook is a space over which I have ownership, documentation in the scrapbook is about people to whom I have an ethical responsibility. The approach always goes beyond the self.

In thinking through 'wholeheartedness' I pick up the thread of my engagement with the teacher about the children using the instruments. We had a relaxed conversation where she explained that in the past the children had thrown instruments, breaking some and making unbearable noise. She didn't feel comfortable having them available. I identified with her feelings but expressed my opinion on the value of the children having some freedom to try out the instruments. I asked if she would feel comfortable with my setting up a music workshop in the garden where I would act as a musical play partner where the children would interact with the instruments. She was very supportive of the idea and we agreed that I would set clear expectations about being respectful of each other and the instruments.

I introduced the workshop to the children at morning group time, explaining they were being trusted with the instruments, and that I would be there to play alongside them and join in with whatever songs or ensembles they wanted to create. I told them I would be writing things in my scrapbook and that they could ask me about what I was writing or drawing. Most of the children visited the workshop at some point in the day. There were no incidences where I had to remind them of behaviour expectations. The children understood that they could explore. I regarded them as capable and gave them my full attention as I documented what went on. I wrote observations and reflections on individual musical happenings that stood out to me. Some children led ensemble performances, made up dances, invented songs or sung songs from 'The Greatest Show Man'. One child directed me in my music-making and gave suggestions of instruments which would sound more like a crocodile during our rendition of 'Old MacDonald had a Farm'. We became bound together relationally and with the instruments and their sounds in the outdoors. The workshop left space for unknown things to occur. I learned so much about the children from making music with them and observing their play. The teacher & TA came out regularly to see what was

happening and beamed. I shared my observations with them afterwards and they were delighted with how things had gone and by the way the children had responded. They said that they would feel more relaxed about leaving the instruments out more frequently in future.

Some Implications of the Scrapbook Approach as a Pedagogy of Ignorance for General Practice – Rebecca and Kathy

Through the sharing of the approach that Kathy had taken, her mentor, also a nursery owner, saw the power, possibility and potentiality of what she was doing: not just an elite opportunity, but something that could be made possible for every practitioner as a way of 'not knowing'. This would be part of ongoing professional development that would recognise the diverse knowledge, experiences and passions practitioners brought and could share for the benefit of all children. Scrapbooks were purchased and practitioners encouraged to use them. Kathy noted that:

The prospect of having a space where the unknown is celebrated when much of the role of a teacher is about knowing was unsettling at first. However, I reassured my colleagues that the hardest part is starting and that they can use the book in whatever way they wanted. And they did.

The reflective power of the scrapbook has since led Kathy to consider ways in which she and other practitioners use the virtual reflective tool, 'Tapestry'¹. Kathy suggests:

I began to frame my entries for the Learning Journals of my Key Children with less certainty and much more as reflective conversations between me and the children's caregivers. I documented the richness of the children's 'Hundred Languages' as I saw them and used them to pose uncertain questions. I have come to think of the scrapbook and Tapestry as mutually reinforcing in their communicative possibilities for 'wholehearted' reflective approaches. Since engaging with Tapestry in this way, the collaboration between me and caregivers has become much more of a mutual, exchange of knowledge and as well as giving us permission to share our 'ignorances' and to be curious about the children's needs. This is a respectful way to work.

Final Thoughts – Rebecca and Kathy

What are the possibilities within the hectic busyness of the day-to-day practical demands of nursery life to make time for 'uncertain' reflection, either within the physical format of the scrapbook or the online facility of a tool such as Tapestry? Certainly, Kathy admits that this is a challenge but she also stresses that all practitioners require time for reflection where they can follow their own lines of thought to legitimately 'be ignorant' in order to sustain wholehearted practice for their benefit and for the children.

Maybe achieving this is a matter of values and belief: for those nurseries that enable practitioners to reflect and to 'not know' alongside the children, will encourage the love of learning together. What could be more needed at an uncertain time such as this, as many

¹ Tapestry is the Online Learning Journal for the Early years Foundation Phase

practitioners, caregivers and children return to their nurseries for the first time for many months? For the joy this brings, the final words must go to Kathy:

I observed one of my Key Children looking at a light reflection of some water on the back of an easel in the garden. He was fascinated by this. We stayed and watched it move together for a prolonged period of time. I wrote about this on Tapestry and asked whether his caregivers had seen their child noticing shadows or reflections. His mother explained excitedly that they had some mirror disco balls that hung in their house. The child had recently began following the light reflections that came from them. She offered to bring the balls into nursery for all the children. When they arrived the children and I played with them in the garden and we chased light reflections all morning.

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